



Tips for Talking with Families about Developmental Concerns

Choose an Optimal Time

- **Choose a time and place where you can talk alone.**

Share your thoughts in person; this is not a conversation to have on the phone. If you are still responsible for children during this time, ask another adult to supervise them.

- **Make sure both you and the family have enough time to talk.**

This should not be done in a hurry. You may want to schedule this conversation ahead of time. You might say, “Mary, I often have regular chats throughout the year with families to get to know them better, talk about how their children, or just general things we need to touch base on. It’s time to schedule a chat with you. I wonder if you would have time this week?”

Be Strengths-based

- **Begin by saying something positive about the child.**

You might point out several things you really like about the child — his smile, curiosity, or love of puzzles. You might mention something positive the child did recently. Say something positive about the child’s relationship with the family. When things go wrong, families sometimes tend to blame themselves. Pointing out the positives helps reassure them that they are doing a good job raising their child. You might say, “*Mary, Sara seems to have a real interest in puzzles. She is so skilled at them. Tell me, have you worked with her on this? I can tell that you seem to have a real interest in helping Sara grow and develop.*”

Be an Active Listener

- **Ask if the family has concerns or questions about how the child seems to be developing.**

Quietly and respectfully ask the family to share what they have noticed. Who, what, when, where and how questions will help you gather more information and help families focus on the issue. You might say, “*I wonder if you have had any concerns about Jason being able to understand what you say?*” or “*Have you noticed if Sara seems to be having a hard time hearing loud noises or people talking? Tell me what you have noticed.*” You might also say, “*How long has this been happening? When does this seem to happen? What happens next? Has anyone else noticed this? Where does this seem to happen most?*”

Be Clear and Use Real Language

- **Choose your words carefully.**

Rather than say, *“I think Sara might be deaf,”* give specific examples and describe what you have seen. You might say, *“I noticed the other day a gust of wind blew the door shut. It made a loud bang and scared all of us, but Sara didn’t even flinch.”*

- **Avoid using labels or technical terms.**

It is not your job to identify the specific disability, but rather bring attention to a concern. It is a very scary thing for families to hear that someone may think their child has a disability. Keep it simple. Use words that describe only what you have seen. You might say, *“I’ve noticed that Sara doesn’t seem to hear loud sounds”,* or, *“Jason seems to bump into things a lot as if he has trouble seeing.”*

Be Prepared to Share Resources

- **Be ready to offer information and resources.**

Be prepared to guide the family through the next steps to get an evaluation or help for the child. The first step usually is to have the child’s doctor assess the situation. For children birth through three, Early Intervention services at Colorado Bluesky would be an appropriate referral. Your local school has Child Find services for children three through five who have a delay that impacts their education.

Be a Supportive Partner

- **Continue your support.**

When families find out that their child has a disability, they may be in shock. Many families go through a period of grieving. They may become depressed or angry. The range of emotions they experience may make it hard for them to complete everyday tasks. Continue to be understanding and to listen and offer help.

- **Build Strong Relationships with Families.**

Building relationships with families happens through time and daily interactions. Be sure to continue to communicate with the family about how their child is learning and growing and share success while respecting each family and their journey.

Trust Yourself

- As someone who cares for children every day, you are in a unique position to notice when a child may have a development delay. Sharing your concerns respectfully with parents shows that you care about their child. Even if a parent seems to resist your efforts at first, they will most likely be grateful later for your concern.

